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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 001563

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DEPT FOR EUR DAS BRYZA & EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/29/2017  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [OSCE](#) [GG](#)  
SUBJECT: SOUTH OSSETIA TENSIONS HIGH

REF: A. TBILISI 1368

[1](#)B. TBILISI 1120

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4(b)&(d).

#### Summary

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[1](#)1. (SBU) A number of dangerous eruptions in tension have recently occurred in South Ossetia, suggesting that we may be in for a long, hot summer in the conflict zone. Georgian villagers have squared off with Russian peacekeepers over Georgian efforts to improve a road connecting two Georgian villages, the South Ossetian de facto authorities are continuing to block irrigation canals that normally supply Georgian farmers, and the two sides are regularly exchanging fire north of Tskhinvali near Tamarasheni. Fortunately, thus far none of the incidents has spiraled into a major confrontation, but in this heavily armed environment the danger is real. End Summary.

#### Flashpoint One: Roads

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[1](#)2. (SBU) Following the South Ossetian-initiated violence of May 12-13 (ref B), much of which occurred west of Tskhinvali around Avnevi, both sides have attempted to build or improve roads that would make it possible to reach villages in that area without having to go through the other side's territory.

First the South Ossetians tried to build a north-south road from Khetagurovo to Muguti on May 24. Armed Georgian forces stepped in to stop them, and a tense standoff ensued that eventually ended peacefully when the South Ossetians withdrew. Then the Georgians made attempts in June to improve the west-east road from Avnevi to Zemo Nikozi, on June 12-15 and again on June 27-28. The Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF), whose commander argued that the construction was a source of tension, deployed to stop both efforts. The JPKF was initially successful, but on June 28, a large number of Georgian civilians surrounded JPKF positions, pouring cans of paint on the armored vehicles and their occupants, in scenes that were subsequently shown on Georgian television. According to OSCE, it appears the JPKF decided to withdraw at this point, leaving the Georgians in control of the area.

[1](#)3. (C) OSCE Political Advisor Gantcho Gantchev told us June 28 that, according to the 1992 dividing line in the conflict, the Georgians have the right to undertake road construction in the area, while the South Ossetians do not. (Note: It is not clear if this is an official OSCE position; recent OSCE written reports on the issue have not made this argument. End Note.) Gantchev noted that unlike the South Ossetians' planned road, the Georgian road already exists, but it needs improvements in order to be passable in all weather conditions. In fact, the planned paths of the two roads cross, meaning there would be no way for both sides to build their roads without encountering each other.

## Flashpoint Two: Water

14. (C) The South Ossetians continue to block irrigation canals that transport water to Georgian fields and orchards both inside and out of the conflict zone. Prime Minister Noghaideli has twice called the Ambassador and other representatives of the international community to argue for help, especially to urge the Russians to pressure the de facto authorities to re-open the canals. In a June 25 conversation, Noghaideli told the Ambassador that the governor of Georgia's Shida Kartli region was threatening to cut off the drinking water pipeline to Tskhinvali if the South Ossetians did not relent on the canals. The Ambassador strongly warned Noghaideli that the Georgians should not do this because it would hurt their credibility internationally and with the South Ossetian population. According to OSCE officials, on June 29 a group of Georgian civilians blocked the Transcaucasian Highway at the JPKF post in Megvrekisi, south of Tskhinvali, to protest the closure of the canals.

15. (SBU) The canal closure is a legacy of the May-June water crisis in South Ossetia, which left Tskhinvali without drinking water for two weeks (ref A). At the time, the Georgians refused to permit South Ossetian repair crews to enter the Georgian enclave, and eventually repaired on their own the most serious damage to the drinking water pipeline, a place where storms had dislodged it from a concrete support above the Didi Liakhvi River in Kheiti. In the meantime the South Ossetians turned off the pipeline in Java, above the Georgian enclave, as well as the irrigation canals near Tskhinvali that flowed south to Georgian-controlled areas.

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The Georgians completed repairs in Kheiti June 5, and a joint team including South Ossetian representatives viewed the repairs the same day. After a delay, the South Ossetians re-started the water in Java June 7, and it began flowing

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south through the Georgian enclave to Tskhinvali. While the water flow was sufficient to fill the underground reservoirs above Tbilisi -- OSCE officials tell us there is now ample running water in Tskhinvali -- it was only 20-30 percent of the expected volume.

16. (C) Since June 7 the sides have been unable to agree on additional inspections of the pipeline, and the South Ossetians have not re-opened the irrigation canals. The South Ossetians are insisting on a repeat inspection of the Georgian repairs at Kheiti, while the Georgians are calling for an inspection of the whole pipeline. The Georgians have told us that in a June 19 meeting in Tskhinvali, State Minister for Conflict Resolution Antadze proposed to the South Ossetians that two joint teams simultaneously check the water flow above and below the Georgian enclaves; if the tests showed that water was being lost in the Georgian area, the teams could then inspect the whole pipe in the Georgian area to find the problem. The Georgians believe that in fact the water is being lost in the separatist area north of the Georgian enclave, due to the poor design and maintenance of the pipe. OSCE Deputy Head of Mission Veselin Nikolaev has told us that the current stand-off appears to serve the South Ossetians' political interest well; if the Georgians use their leverage -- by turning off the drinking water -- the Georgians will look bad internationally and the de facto authorities can tell Tskhinvali residents that Georgian-backed leader Dmitry Sanakoyev is to blame for the lack of drinking water.

## Flashpoint Three: Shootings

17. (C) There has been a series of shootings between the two sides north of Tskhinvali over the past week, near the Georgian village of Tamarasheni. At least six people have been wounded, four Ossetians and two Georgians. According to press reports mortars and rocket-propelled grenades were used

(in addition to small arms) but OSCE officials were unable to confirm this as of June 29. Gantchev told us June 29 that OSCE was picking up troubling reports of "snipers." While firing across the lines is not uncommon in the conflict zone, Gantchev noted that in the past shots were typically unaimed, intended more to frighten than to hit targets.

#### Other Incidents

18. (C) The South Ossetians have continued to block the road north of Tskhinvali into and out of the Georgian enclave at Tamarasheni, denying freedom of movement to the local population. The South Ossetians have also reportedly stopped Georgian buses in Kukhati, harassing the passengers. Gantchev told us that it was in response to this that the Georgians set up a new police checkpoint in Prisi (in fact in between two villages called Prisi, one controlled by each side) and have apparently begun digging trenches and building other fortifications to protect the post. Gantchev said the JPKF and the South Ossetians have argued this violates existing agreements, but Gantchev added that because this is a police post, it could be considered not an "armed formation" to which agreements apply.

#### Comment

19. (C) The situation in South Ossetia is volatile and it could get out of control -- either due to a conscious decision (as happened with the South Ossetian-precipitated violence May 12-13) or by accident. We are urging the Georgians to show restraint, and not to be provoked into a more serious confrontation. While the two sides walk along the brink of a major clash, they are also trying to insulate themselves from the other side's leverage for the longer term by building bypass roads, digging wells to obtain independent access to water, and thinking about new gas and electric lines that would not be vulnerable to interruption. Of course, once either side has an invulnerable road or supply of utilities, it no longer has any disincentive to cutting off the other side's roads or utilities. If it is not lost, the interconnectedness of these networks is a real incentive for the two sides to interact and to build confidence. The water pipeline is a good example; if it could be renovated as envisioned in the donors' economic rehabilitation program, the result would help people on both sides and tie them closer together. We hope that the two sides will show some interest in realizing these opportunities, perhaps at the Steering Committee meeting for the donors' program scheduled for July 2.

10. (C) A key factor in determining the international community's ability to manage crises in South Ossetia is the role of the OSCE. As we go through the process of choosing a new Head of Mission, it is post's view that OSCE needs a

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leader who is active and who interprets his/her mandate as granting authority to get in the middle of such issues and hammer out a solution between the sides.

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